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ABSTRACT

This paper describes a graduate course at Louisiana State University in Shreveport, entitled "The Electronic Church, with an Emphasis on Its Evangelists." The paper addresses some of the ways in which criticism is taught via the television evangelists. Following a mini-course in speech analysis, the course focuses on the various aspects of the electronic church and the backgrounds, personality traits, life styles, preaching styles, theologies, and political beliefs of Jim and Tammy Bakker, Jerry Falwell, Oral and Richard Roberts, Pat Robertson, James Robinson, Robert Schuller, Jimmy Swaggart, David Paul, LeRoy Jenkins, and Peter Popoff. The paper concludes that the chief ingredients in a course of this nature should be thorough and up-to-date research, objectivity, and freedom of expression. (MS)

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Teaching Criticism Via TV Evangelists

Charlene J. Handford

As a part of the graduate offerings in the Master of Liberal Arts at Louisiana State University in Shreveport, I designed and taught a course entitled The Electronic Church,[1] with an Emphasis on Its Evangelists. Though this was not a course in rhetorical criticism, guiding my students through an objective study of the electronic church necessitated our utilization of the tools of speech analysis. The purpose of this paper is to address some of the ways in which I taught criticism via the TV evangelists.

Course Description

In seeking to study the various aspects of the electric church, we explored the backgrounds, personality traits, life styles, preaching styles, theologies, and political beliefs of a select group of television preachers. This group consisted of Jim and Tammy Bakker, Jerry Falwell, Oral and Richard Roberts, Pat Robertson, James Robinson, Robert Schuller, Jimmy Swaggart, David Paul, LeRoy Jenkins, and Peter Popoff. Concentrating on one evangelist at a time, I first presented biographical information; then we viewed a video tape of a typical program; finally, we analyzed the tape. This was a total of about three class hours devoted to each evangelist.

Suggestions for Teaching Criticism

Prior to our study of the television preachers, I guided my class through a mini course in speech analysis because they had no formal training in rhetorical criticism. This culminated in my listing the following general criteria for analyzing a speech:

I. The speaker
   A. Qualifications and experience in subject
   B. Factors accounting for skill in speaking

II. The occasion
   A. Immediate setting
   B. Social setting

III. The audience
   A. Audience composition
   B. Relation of audience to subject
   C. Relation of audience to speaker

IV. The speech
- A. Purpose
- B. Organization
- C. Style of language
- D. Use of support
- E. Emotional appeal
- F. Delivery
  1. Mode of presentation
  2. Eye contact
  3. Bodily movement
  4. Voice
- G. Ethos

V. Effects of speech[2]

However, this criteria for speech analysis was not appropriate for all of the evangelists we studied. For example, we could apply much of this as we analyzed one of Billy Graham's sermons, but that same set of standards did not apply as well to the Richard Roberts Program which followed a talk-show format. For that reason, I prepared handouts with criteria tailored for each tape we viewed. I instructed the students to use these as guides for analysis. The following are two examples:

Example I: Sermon by Jerry Falwell

1. Comment on the organizational pattern of the sermon. Clear? Easy to follow? Visual cues?
2. What is the thesis of this sermon?
3. What is his purpose?
4. Here, is Falwell a preacher or a teacher?
5. What is Falwell's primary source?
6. Does his heavy reliance on this source pose problems for the non-believer?
7. Describe the setting.
8. Did his sermon seem religious or political?
9. Compare and contrast this program with those we have already seen.

Example II: PTL with Jim and Tammy Bakker

1. What is the format of the program?

2. Describe the set and its possible impact on the viewer.

3. Describe the appearance of Jim and Tammy. Effect on ethos?

4. Analysis of Jim's talk on "Taking Authority." What is his primary strategy as he develops his theme? What are his primary emotional appeals?

5. How does Jim relate to the audience?

6. Do the prayers serve a function other than talking to or praising God?

Opportunities for teaching how objectivity and accuracy of assessment relate to speech criticism arose as students bombarded me with questions regarding the ethics and motives of the TV evangelists. In response I instructed the class to maintain objectivity as we explored the electronic church, and I encouraged them to form their own conclusions based on what information we had.

Perhaps the most frequently asked question was in regard to the sincerity of the evangelists. In explanation, I pointed out that because we were limited to secondary sources and lacked an opportunity to observe our subjects off-camera, we could not be sure of our assessment of their motives, but we would formulate our opinions on what evidence we had.

Some of the students raised questions pertaining to rumors about particular TV evangelists. For example, several in the class indicated they had heard that Tammy Bakker had once been a prostitute. My answer in this instance was that I had not come across anything in my research that suggested that to be true, but that I would be alert to any information concerning this question.

Most students were willing to acknowledge that their individual religious beliefs could easily color their conclusions, but agreed that they should guard against that as much as possible. Because I teach in a public institution in what is referred to as the Bible belt, I was especially mindful of the religious beliefs of my students. Though I

emphasized at the beginning of the course that religion is a private matter, some students eventually indicated their affiliation and others remained silent. Confessing to be a "sort of" Baptist and stressing my tolerance for all religions, I repeatedly stressed that their religious preferences would have no bearing on their grades. At the same time, I made clear that they were free to express their opinions and attitudes in regard to the electric church and its evangelists but encouraged them to base their conclusions on documented evidence.

Looking back, I have concluded that the chief ingredients in a course of this nature should be thorough and up-to-date research, objectivity, and freedom of expression coupled with Loren Reid's advice to speech teachers, "Keep your students informed about what you are doing and why you are doing it."[3]

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Notes

[1]Ben Armstrong, The Electric Church (Nashville: T. Nelson, 1979) refers to the radio and television ministry as the electric church.

[2]This criteria is based on Lester Thonssen, A. Craid Baird, Waldo W. Braden Speech Criticism 3rd ed. (New York: Ronald Press Co., 1970), pp. 347-533 and other texts on speech criticism.

[3]Loren Reid, Teaching Speech 3rd ed. (Columbia, Missouri: Art Craft Press, 1960), p. 30.